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**‘This will be a popular picture’: Giovanni Battista Moroni’s *Tailor* and the Female Gaze**

Lene Østermark-Johansen

In October 1862, when Charles Eastlake had secured the purchase of Giovanni Battista Moroni’s *The Tailor* (c. 1570) for the National Gallery (Fig. 1), he noted with satisfaction:

Portrait of a tailor in a white doublet with minute slashes — dark reddish nether dress — a leather belt [strap & buckle] round the end of the white dress. He stands before a table with scissors in his rt hand, & a piece of [black] cloth in the left.



Fig. 1: Giovanni Battista Moroni, *The Tailor*, c. 1570, oil on canvas, 99.5 × 77 cm, National Gallery, London. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#).

The hands excellent — the head low in tone but good (one or two spotty lights only too much cleaned) the ear carefully & well painted — All in good state — The lowness of the tone in the face the only objection — Background varied in darkness — light enough to relieve dark side of face & d. air — darker in left side & below — quite el.<sup>1</sup>

Eastlake's description, focusing on the effects of colour, light, and the state of preservation, does not give away much about the charismatic qualities of the painting. With his final remark, 'quite eligible', he recognizes one of the most engaging of the old master portraits as suitable for purchase by the National Gallery. Eastlake's wife Elizabeth immediately perceived the powerful presence of the tailor and made the following entry in her journal: 'It is a celebrated picture, called the "Taglia Panni."<sup>2</sup> The tailor, a bright-looking man with a ruff, has his shears in his beautifully painted hands, and is looking at the spectator. This will be a popular picture.'<sup>3</sup> The difference in enthusiasm between the two journal entries is striking; clearly the female critic had an eye for the alluring sitter which seems to have eluded her husband. Elizabeth Eastlake's prediction proved to be precise: *The Tailor* immediately became a much discussed and much loved addition to the national collection and has remained so ever since. It was the star exhibit and advertising image of the 2014 Royal Academy retrospective exhibition of Moroni's works,<sup>4</sup> and Elizabeth Fremantle, author of several historical novels, summed up the painting's appeal to the modern woman:

He gazes at us with a beguiling directness, as if he has overheard us talking about him and wants us to know. He appears confident in his everyday clothes, with no need of accoutrements of status to shore him up. His head is tilted slightly, his hair cropped short and a beard and moustache give him the look of any young man you might see on the streets of London

<sup>1</sup> *The Travel Notebooks of Sir Charles Eastlake*, ed. by Susanna Avery-Quash, Volume of the Walpole Society, 73, 2 vols (London: Walpole Society, 2011), I, 595.

<sup>2</sup> 'Tagliapanni' means 'cutter of clothes'. The painting is also sometimes known under another Italian title, 'Il Sarto', which means 'tailor'. In the nineteenth century two Italian terms and the English translation were all applied to the painting. The current website gives both the English title and 'Il Tagliapanni' in parentheses, <<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-battista-moroni-the-tailor-il-tagliapanni>> [accessed 31 January 2019], as does Nicholas Penny, *The Sixteenth-Century Italian Paintings*, National Gallery Catalogues (London: National Gallery Publications, 2004–), I: *Brescia, Bergamo, and Cremona* (2004), pp. 236–41. The cover of the volume features a detail from Moroni's painting.

<sup>3</sup> *Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake*, ed. by Charles Eastlake Smith, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1895), II, 173.

<sup>4</sup> See the exhibition catalogue by Simone Facchinetti and Arturo Galansino, *Giovanni Battista Moroni* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014).

today — no silly hat with an ostrich plume for our no-non-sense tailor. [...] There he is, living and breathing, his mind churning, on the gallery wall collapsing time — you can almost hear the sound of his shears cutting through the marked out cloth, feel the velvet beneath his fingers. The effect is utterly disarming.<sup>5</sup>

Both Eastlake and Fremantle stress the sitter's engaging gaze. The Victorian critic's focus on the 'bright-looking man [...] looking at the spectator' pinpoints the reciprocal exchange of gazes between viewer and sitter as a fundamental characteristic of the painting, and her modern counterpart imagines a knowing sitter who — in an illusionary collapse between art and life, the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries — overhears and responds to the modern conversation in the gallery. As a member of a group of writers of historical novels labelling themselves 'the history girls', Fremantle is professionally aware of the importance of erasing the boundaries between 'then' and 'now'. Her contemporary gaze at the tailor's body, at ease with itself inside his clothes, applies twenty-first century ideas of body awareness to the old master painting, which could hardly have been phrased by Lady Eastlake some one hundred and fifty years ago. Yet it is the timelessness of Moroni's *Tailor*, his likeness to the modern, metrosexual man, which grants him an immediate appeal to a range of contemporary women writers. In her blog, the English wedding illustrator Sarah Godsill confesses:

I think I've always been a little bit in love with the Tailor since first meeting him around Art History A' level time. Back then, he was older than me. It's the most extraordinarily beautiful portrait, and quite unusual in its representation of a man at work rather than a wealthy patron. The tailor's clothes pin him down in time — but his face is timeless. There's something quite dreamy about him — and he looks like a nice sort of chap.

For the maturing female spectator, the tailor's face becomes the attraction: an ageless fancy man, fit for a modern romance. Godsill undresses and redresses Moroni's sitter to match her own fantasies: 'Stick him in a cable-knit sweater', she suggests, 'and he could have been painted yesterday. Or in this case, today.'<sup>6</sup> In her hands, the old master painting becomes a paper doll (*Fig. 2*), a type which can travel through time and assume the fashion of the day. The privilege of dressing the man who professionally dresses

<sup>5</sup> 'Moroni: The Portrait as a Portal to the Past — Elizabeth Fremantle', *The History Girls*, 13 January 2015 <<http://the-history-girls.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/moroni-portrait-as-portal-to-past.html>> [accessed 31 January 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Godsill, 'The Tailor, 1565–70 by Moroni', 10 November 2011 <<http://www.eventsillustration.co.uk/2011/11/10/1040/>> [accessed 31 January 2019].



Fig. 2: Sarah Godsill, Moroni's Tailor in a Cable-Knit Sweater, 2011, watercolour  
<http://www.eventsillustration.co.uk/2011/11/10/1040/> [accessed 31 January 2019]. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

others becomes one of power and appropriation. From the austere walls in the National Gallery, Moroni's *Tailor* travels into the domestic sphere of the female artist who makes her living from illustrating other people's weddings. Whatever distance there might have been between the framed foreign oil painting and the female spectator has collapsed in the watercolour copy of Moroni's sitter. He has lost his profession and become the nice chap next door.

The very anonymity of the sitter, the fact that he is nameless, but depicted in the capacity of his profession, is part of his attraction.<sup>7</sup> Not many portraits of Renaissance tailors exist; portraiture as conventionally an art form for the privileged has made critics question whether Moroni's

<sup>7</sup> Attempts have recently been made to identify the sitter within the communities of tailors in Bergamo and Albino. See Silvio Leydi, 'Sarti a Bergamo (ed Albino) nel maturo Cinquecento', in *Giovanni Battista Moroni: Il Sarto*, ed. by M. Cristina Rodeschini (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2015), pp. 41–57.



tailor really was an artisan, yet already in 1545 Pietro Aretino complained that portraiture was currently being degraded by depicting craftsmen like tailors, perhaps in allusion to Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli's painting of the very same year (*Fig. 3*).<sup>8</sup> In comparison with Moroni's, Bedoli's tailor is old, clad in black, shown with the tools of his trade and a luxurious piece of fabric which achieve foreground status. Seated behind a table, with only the upper part of his body visible, the tailor's head and hands are lit, to emphasize the interplay between mental creativity and manual labour which characterizes the profession. By contrast, Moroni's tailor is young, erect, sexualized by the codpiece which emerges from his slashed breeches and by his confrontational gaze. Clad in the red and white often



*Fig. 3: Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli, Portrait of a Tailor, c. 1545, oil on canvas, 88 × 71 cm, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. Mentnafunangann, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Girolamo_Mazzola_Bedoli_-_Portrait_of_a_Tailor_-_WGA01618.jpg).*

<sup>8</sup> Aretino's letter is quoted in M. Cristina Rodeschini, 'This will be a popular picture', in *Giovanni Battista Moroni*, ed. by Rodeschini, pp. 9–11 (p. 9).

associated with femininity, in a tight-fitting doublet which accentuates the shape of his torso, he is a powerful presence, potent as a tool-using creature, invested with both phallic power and the scissors of castration.<sup>9</sup> His slashed breeches bear testimony to his ability to use those scissors, and the black cloth in the foreground, with its discreet white chalk lines, lays out the path for the right cut. *Il Tagliapanni* — the cutter of clothes — has a profound bodily awareness. He sees the body underneath the cloth, knows what the right cut might do for it, and operates in the interface between dressed and undressed. His engaging gaze, sizing you up, measures the viewer as he would measure a customer.

The modern female responses above do not differ significantly from those of their nineteenth-century forebears, a fact which suggests a transcendental aspect of the painting integral to its old master quality. In discussing Moroni's painting as an object of the female gaze I wish to think in the broadest possible terms of women as disseminators of the old masters, in the sense of women as viewers, writers, readers, consumers, and copyists, engaging with *The Tailor* in a wide variety of media and contexts, testifying to the ubiquity of the work in the popular mind. I wish to discuss the notion of a gendered gaze by looking at ways in which men and women engaged with a painting, which soon became a familiar image, an old master painting to which everyone could relate: men, women, children, young, and old.<sup>10</sup> *The Tailor* was the first work by Moroni to enter the National Gallery, a collection which now holds eleven paintings by the master, the greatest collection outside Bergamo.<sup>11</sup> The proliferation of the image testifies to its immense popularity, as an item to be collected, posed as in *tableaux vivants*, embroidered, pinned up on the wall, or visited as part of a busy shopping day in London in between visits to the milliners and the army stores.

Unlike Titian, Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, Moroni never became the subject of Victorian monographs or lengthy essays in the periodicals. The absence of a Moroni biography in Giorgio Vasari's popular *Lives of the Artists* (1550/68) is undoubtedly one reason for this. As no other sixteenth-century sources provided lively anecdotes about the artist, Moroni remained almost as anonymous as his tailor to a Victorian

<sup>9</sup> *The Tailor's* doublet and slashed breeches have been studied and reconstructed: see Alessio Francesco Palmieri-Marinoni and others, 'Aspetti di costume e moda nel Sarto di Giovan Battista Moroni', in *Giovan Battista Moroni*, ed. by Rodeschini, pp. 59–71; and Francesco Palmieri-Marinoni and Sara Piccolo Paci, 'L'abito del Sarto: la ricostruzione', pp. 73–77.

<sup>10</sup> Hilary Fraser's *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) is crucial to my thinking about the gendered gaze here.

<sup>11</sup> See discussions of the individual paintings by Moroni in Penny.

audience, and there was free scope for imaginative recreation. Responses to *The Tailor* span from attempts at imaginary portraiture and speculations about the sitter as an idealized man, dressing up as a tailor,<sup>12</sup> to praise of its realism, depicting the artistic elevation of an honest manual labourer. Hovering somewhere between genre painting and portrait, *The Tailor* fed into a nineteenth-century work ethos, celebrating manual labour and traditional crafts. Its realism linked it to nineteenth-century taste, with its emphasis on the quotidian, the intimate, and the domestic.

On 17 April 1863 *The Tailor* was first hung in the National Gallery. Some eight months later an anonymous female critic in the *Saturday Review* devoted half of her essay to the painting as the highlight of the new works in the collection. Writing with the extensive use of the authoritative ‘we’ so often employed by anonymous female critics in the 1860s, she issued great praise on Eastlake for his enrichment of the national collection and gave *The Tailor* pride of place as the concluding work of art which ought to serve as a beacon for the modern portrait artist.<sup>13</sup> Fascinated by the way in which Moroni had turned a lowly subject into high art, she focused on what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had termed ‘the pregnant moment’ for his depiction, a moment rich in imaginative appeal: ‘Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible.’<sup>14</sup> Moroni’s intellectual capacity to condense the life, action, and profession of a tailor into the moment before cutting the cloth was held up as an ideal of good dramatic portraiture for contemporary portrait painters in a didactic linking of the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The reviewer praised ‘the dignity of common labour’, ‘the poetry of honest craftsmanship’ in Moroni’s depiction of ‘a homely subject’ as something having ‘a direct bearing on the art of our own time’ (‘New Pictures’, p. 18). Dismissing the relevance for a modern audience of grand religious painting, she set up *The Tailor* as a lesson to portrait painters, sitters, and gallery spectators alike of an old master painting which could and should form a school for depictions of the modern

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Charles Eastlake’s earliest notes on the painting when encountered in an Italian collection in 1855: ‘Morone — St Tagliapanni — an emblematical portrait of a young man as a tailor in allusion to name (cloth & scissors)’ (*Travel Notebooks*, ed. by Avery-Quash, 1, 246).

<sup>13</sup> ‘New Pictures at the National Gallery’, *Saturday Review*, 2 January 1864, pp. 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. and intro. by Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 78. In Lessing’s main distinction between the visual and the literary arts as those evolving in space and over time respectively, he was, quite naturally, interested in the ways in which sculptors and painters could compress time and action into a frozen moment loaded with impact, his so-called ‘pregnant moment’.



individual. The reviewer stressed the powerful presence on the canvas and singled out G. F. Watts as one of the few modern inheritors of the old masters who could learn from a visit to the National Gallery:

To any such man, who may be capable of doing good service of a kind greatly needed, we would say with much respect — Take counsel of the early days! Pay a visit to Tagliapanni! Renew your strength by the study of Moroni! (p. 18)

Three exclamation marks and three imperatives in a row at the very end of the essay — could Moroni's *Tailor* ask for a better welcome into the London world of art? Lodged safely in one of the most rapidly expanding national institutions, the painting was turning into an institution in its own right, a treasure of the past with the imperative to influence the portraiture of the future. In singling out the Italianate G. F. Watts as the modern inheritor of Moroni's style, the reviewer predicted the whole series of Victorian sages soon to be caught by Watts's paintbrush and admitted to the National Portrait Gallery. Watts's own self-portrait of 1864 (*Fig. 4*) testifies all too



*Fig. 4:* George Frederic Watts, *Self-Portrait*, 1864, oil on canvas, 64.8 × 52.1 cm, © Tate Britain, London. CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/watts-self-portrait-no1561>>.

clearly to his interest in old master portraiture of the psychological kind, with Raphael's portrait of Baldassare Castiglione as an intermediary.

Moroni's painting soon became one of the most frequently copied paintings in the gallery, where many of the copyists were women.<sup>15</sup> At the turn of the century, male critics like Charles Lewis Hind, former editor of the *Art Journal*, the *Studio*, and now of the *Academy*, discussed such copying in highly condescending terms:

Plainly, copying pictures is a pleasant way for ladies, with small but sufficient incomes, to pass their time. The airs of Bohemia are wafted across suburbia. Most of the copyists are ladies, and I can understand the feeling, half shame, half gaiety, with which one settles down, on a fine October morning, to wrest the secret of the underlying charm from Piero di Cosimo's 'Death of Procris', or to copy Moroni's grave tailor, or some exquisitely simple Florentine head, or a wistful Madonna of Botticelli's, or some solemn unapproachable portrait that Velasquez took in his easy stride. Of course the emprise is doomed to failure, but there is something of heroism in the intention.<sup>16</sup>

Hind could not imagine a Carlylean 'Hero as Copyist'. The heroism to which he refers is the female delusion of imagining that meticulous copying of the old masters could ever reach the heights of a Titian or a Moroni. In actual fact, Hind declared, modern women simply needed the romance of bohemia and some occupation to save them from boredom. While their incomes and social status were never put at risk like those of real artists, they produced third-rate works of art for which there was no need and which would in most cases be relegated to utter oblivion. In his diatribe against the female copyists, Hind ignored the function of copying in the academic schools — *imitatio* as a complex kind of translation/mediation/interpretation. Copying was a serious way of engaging with the old masters, of imitating their palette, their technique, their ways of looking. The ambition at the root of so much female copying, of reaching the past through the brush, would not seem to have registered with the editor of the *Academy*.

By the end of the century the painted copy was challenged by good photographic copies, available in several different sizes, to fit into many different kinds of domestic interiors. The German company Hanfstaengl

<sup>15</sup> See Allison Goudie's excellent essay, 'Verso una storia popolare del Sarto di Moroni in Gran Bretagna', in *Giovanni Battista Moroni*, ed. by Rodeschini, pp. 33–39 (p. 39, n. 22). I owe several of my references to the occurrence of *The Tailor* in Victorian popular culture to Goudie's bibliography. For a discussion of female copyists in the National Gallery, see Meaghan Clarke's article in this issue of 19.

<sup>16</sup> C. L. H. [Charles Lewis Hind], 'Art: Copyists and Craftsmen', *Academy and Literature*, 18 October 1902, pp. 423–24 (p. 423).

had *The Tailor* as the frontispiece image of their catalogue of reproductions from works in the National Gallery, and as one of the few images in the catalogue, *The Tailor* was available in four different sizes.<sup>17</sup> Whereas in the painted copies truth to Moroni's colour scheme was one test of excellence, the photographic process transformed the painting from colour to affordable black and white. An essay by Wallace Crowdy in the *Photographic Journal* celebrated photographic copies as superior to painted copies, thus also dismissing much of the female activity going on in the galleries:

The good photograph is better than the bad picture any day or hour. I wish I could show you on the screen what I can only imperfectly explain to you in words. But, as an illustration, let me take Moroni's 'Tailor', which shares with Greuze's 'Widow', I believe, the honour — or the discomfiture — of being the most frequently copied picture in our own incomparable National Gallery. Go to the National Gallery any students' day and see the copies that are made from this sartorial masterpiece, and with the melancholy impression created in your mind by these, cross the road to Hanfstaengl's and see *their* reproduction of it! You will then feel something of my meaning and will realize what is intended by me when I say that — A good photograph is better than a bad picture.<sup>18</sup>

The painted copies of Moroni surfacing on such websites as *Artnet*, which record past auctions, reveal the range in the quality of copying.<sup>19</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the female *copiste* had established a respectable profession for herself, and she became a figure who turned up repeatedly in the novels and short stories of writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James.<sup>20</sup> The single woman making a living for herself as a copyist frequently became an object of desire in the art galleries in the fiction of the mid- and late nineteenth century, as the male gallery visitor juxtaposed his delight in looking at the original old master painting and the woman who produced a modern copy of it. Other female copyists were fortunate enough to have the originals as part of their own collection. Lady Enid Layard, wife of Sir Austen Henry Layard, spent the last decades of her life in the Ca' Capello on the Grand Canal in Venice, which also housed the Layards' considerable art collection, among them four Moronis, all of which have now joined the

<sup>17</sup> See Charles Lock Eastlake, *Pictures in the National Gallery London* (Munich: Hanfstaengl, 1896).

<sup>18</sup> Wallace L. Crowdy, 'Process Reproduction from an Editor's Point of View', *Photographic Journal*, n.s., 22 (1898), 206–15 (p. 207), emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> See Giovanni Battista Moroni, *Artnet* <<http://www.artnet.com/artists/giovanni-battista-moroni>> [accessed 31 January 2019].

<sup>20</sup> See Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and Henry James's *The American*. See also Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

National Gallery collection. Her journal entries from 1880 to 1910 testify to how she would copy from the Moronis in the house before lunch as one way of involving herself with art.<sup>21</sup> Another would appear to have been the regular party games of *tableaux vivants* or ‘living pictures’ when, on at least two occasions, people visiting the Ca’ Capello impersonated Moroni’s *Tailor* to great acclaim.<sup>22</sup> In Lady Layard’s journal, men take the poses of *The Tailor*, thus engaging with Moroni’s painting in a sculptural and three-dimensional way. Dressing up as, posing as, and looking like *The Tailor* is another form of copying: ephemeral, fleeting, and momentary, only lasting until someone has recognized the original behind the copy.

The popularity of the *tableaux vivants* as party games may well have contributed towards the Victorians’ familiarity with *The Tailor*. In 1878 *Routledge’s Every Girl’s Annual* suggested Moroni’s *Tailor* as a suitable subject for family entertainment with inspiration drawn from the illustrations of Henry Blackburn’s *Illustrated Catalogue to the National Gallery* published the same year.<sup>23</sup> Miss Alicia Leith directed her girl readers to Blackburn’s catalogue for their party games:

The advantage of these handbooks being that they contain drawings of the principal pictures with a short description of them. To those who cannot refer to the originals, and who, afflicted with short memories, have only a vague recollection of the pictures in question, these little pamphlets are invaluable. (*Routledge’s Every Girl’s Annual*, ed. by Leith, p. 432)

She gave advice on how to suspend a gilt frame in an open doorway, covering the space above and below with drapery, while posing the sitter on a dais and paying great attention to the lighting. Leith’s fictitious Master George introduces the game:

‘Ladies and Gentlemen — I know how much interest you take in all that relates to art, particularly our kind host here, who has often told me that one of his chief pleasures in visiting our metropolis is the opportunity afforded him of seeing the exhibitions and picture-galleries for which it is so famous. It is therefore with great pleasure I bring to your notice to-night a fine collection of paintings lent to me for one night only — copies of some of the best pictures now in the possession of the nation, and at present hanging in the noble rooms in Trafalgar

<sup>21</sup> See the transcript of Enid Layard’s journals in the British Library: ‘Lady Layard’s Journal’ <<https://www.browningguide.org/lady-layards-journal/>> [accessed 31 January 2019].

<sup>22</sup> See journal entries for 3 November 1892 and 25 December 1902.

<sup>23</sup> *Routledge’s Every Girl’s Annual*, ed. by Miss Alicia A. Leith (London: Routledge, 1878); Henry Blackburn, *Illustrated Catalogue to the National Gallery (Foreign Schools)* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1878). *The Tailor* was reproduced as cat. no. 697.

Square. I must mention that as a strong light is injurious to the pictures I shall not be able to expose them to view for any length of time, they will only be seen one by one for the space of one minute at most. Should the company wish it, any picture will be exhibited any number of times.' (p. 430)

The sequence of the living pictures exhibited included Joshua Reynolds's *The Age of Innocence*, Thomas Gainsborough's *Mrs Siddons*, and Charles Robert Leslie's *Sir Toby and the Widow (A Scene from Tristram Shandy)*. The latter, however, sent the actors into giggles and the composition collapsed. *The Tailor* saved the day:

At last the exhibitor gave it up in despair and in its stead produced Moroni's 'Tailor', in the proud possession of a pair of shears and a piece of new cloth ready chalked for cutting. Loud and repeated expressions of pleasure greeted each picture as it appeared, and they certainly, one and all, bore a striking resemblance to the old favourites at the National Gallery. (p. 432)

The place of Moroni's *Tailor* in a family magazine for young girls testifies to its popular status only some fifteen years after it had entered the National Gallery, while also illustrating an exchange between publications promoting the old masters and domestic publications. A focus on education, on the proliferation of the classics (Shakespeare figures repeatedly in *Every Girl's Annual*), and on linking country life with life in the metropolis, connects Blackburn's catalogue with Leith's annual magazine. Aimed at a middle-class audience, familiar with tailors, drapers, and milliners, *Every Girl's Annual* brought *The Tailor* to households very different from the original Italian audience for Moroni's painting.

The anonymous critic in the *Saturday Review* had stressed *The Tailor* as a 'homely subject', and the recurrence of the painting in Victorian periodical publications relating to the home testifies to the way in which the Moroni soon became an old friend, a household object. Recounting 'A Woman's Day in Town' in *Cassell's Family Magazine* in 1895, Ivor Merle fitted in a visit to the painting in between domestic shopping with an interesting slippage between visits to the draper's and visits to the museum:

The first thing to be done on reaching London is to dispose of the shopping for 'the house' — not paying amusing visits to an elegant dressmaker or a charming milliner, but downright marketing the stores: laying in the delicacies and condiments not to be had in the village at home or even at the nearest town, and seriously testing cheese and bacon [...]. Mary must have silks for her embroidery; and nurse has dictated a column of requirements, such as gloves, stockings, braces, needles, cottons, tapes, buttons, flannel, house-cloths, and dusters, as



if they need not to be paid for. Buying these goods is the prose of shopping, and the work is put through with speed. [...] Our last errand is to an aesthetic draper's, where, although we only want stuff for a frock for a small child, we cannot resist an examination of the lovely materials and colours of the shopman's displays — those things with Indian names! Has the wily Hindoo ever had a finger in the manufacture of any one of them? Are they not all woven in Manchester or Bradford? Finally, we look in at the National Gallery, just to see that Moroni's 'Tailor' and Bellini's 'Doge' are still in their places; then we start for the station once more.<sup>24</sup>

The chatty, associative technique takes us from modern consumer goods fabricated in the colonies to the old masters, old friends referred to with the greatest familiarity. Art is part of the bric-a-brac experience of a visit to London, and the old masters belong on the shopping list, as the article appears surrounded by advertisements for medicine, lace, Reddit washing powder, and other essays with titles such as 'What to Wear: Chit-Chat on Dress'. Moroni's 'homely subject', advertising himself and his profession,<sup>25</sup> belongs in the commercial world of the petticoats, even if the customers he was sizing up with his penetrating gaze in sixteenth-century Bergamo would most likely have been of the male sex. This extraordinary domestication of the old master in part resides in his profession, which comes close to the everyday lives of the Victorian middle-class woman. There is, however, no doubt that *The Tailor's* status as a desirable object, for both the male and the female gaze, is another important part of the story. The modern wedding illustrator confesses her crush on him, and his recurrence in the fiction of Henry James and Walter Pater may also suggest that he was gradually assuming the status of a gay icon towards the end of the century.

In our exploration of the homeliness imposed on Moroni's painting by the Victorians, it is tempting to see Beatrix Potter's cover illustration of *The Tailor of Gloucester* (1902) as a reworking of *The Tailor* (Fig. 5). The unisex tailor is Potter's domesticated version of *Il Tagliapanni*, reduced in scale to fit the nursery. The power residing in the right use of the scissors is at the heart of Potter's story, and although her tailor is naked, the white paper, the red thread, and the prominent shears subtly bring us back to the old master painting. A less subtle domestication, but one which is also related to scale, is this twentieth-century needlepoint copy of Moroni's painting which raises other issues of intermediality (Fig. 6). The female hand, recreating *The Tailor* through his own materials, stitching, touching, objectifying, and domesticating him for inclusion in a private interior, pays homage

<sup>24</sup> Ivor Merle, 'A Woman's Day in Town', *Cassell's Family Magazine*, January 1895, pp. 119–21.

<sup>25</sup> *The Tailor* also soon became a popular shop sign for the sartorial profession in England.

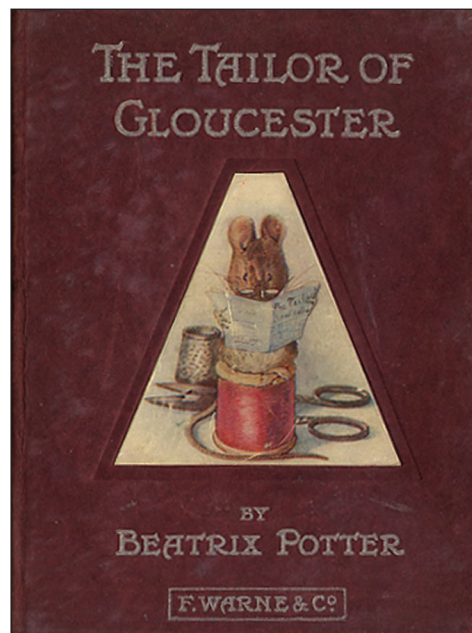


Fig. 5: Cover of the first edition of Beatrix Potter, *The Tailor of Gloucester* (London: Warne, 1902). Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 6: Anon., Needlepoint copy of Moroni's *Tailor*, 20th century, 40.6 × 29.2 cm, private collection. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist and owner.

to the old master, while subjecting the potent tailor to a certain degree of distortion when downscaling him to less than half his original size. In the process his body has shrunk and the head enlarged, so that his gaze now dominates the composition. The seller of the needlepoint, whom we may take to be identical with the copyist, notes:

This IMPRESSIVE needlepoint motif took a gazillion hours to complete and special attention was paid to head and hands which show smaller stitches (aka ‘petit point’) to better emphasize the features and skin tone of ‘The Tailor’. [...] Needlepoint is thankless work in regards to resale value; hours vested in producing this time-consuming handcraft never reflect fair monetary compensation. Be that as it may, this piece is a masterpiece in its category.<sup>26</sup>

This particular female gaze has been engaged with that of the tailor, perhaps more intensively than that of any of his other copyists. The ‘gazillion hours’ involved, and the sense that not all time can be measured in monetary value, must testify to a labour of love. The artist/seller advertises both her artistic pride and the awareness that only she will ever know what it took to produce the copy. ‘Professionally framed with non-glare (museum) glass in a beautiful golden frame’, it is now ‘Ready to hang with a wire in the back’.<sup>27</sup> Moroni’s *Tailor* has been framed in every sense of the word, pinned down, confined behind glass in a modern reworking which testifies to his allure across centuries.

In late-Victorian literature Moroni’s *Tailor* makes a series of cameo performances as a tease, an attractive male object desirable by both male and female gazes. The bright colours and the sexualized body of *Il Tagliapanni* in many ways corresponds to what Thomas Carlyle had described as ‘the dandiacal body’ in his *Sartor Resartus* of 1836.<sup>28</sup> For Carlyle, the dandiacal body is one which solicits your glance, at once subject and object, a looker in every sense of the word. As others dress to live, Carlyle’s dandy lives to dress. His Sartor is a poet of cloth, both a wearer and a maker of clothes, a tool-using animal with a keen aesthetic sense. In his brief chapter on ‘Tailors’, Carlyle elevates the profession in a way which may well have contributed to the cult of Moroni’s painting which, when it entered the National Gallery, somehow became the embodiment of Teufelsdröckh’s

<sup>26</sup> “‘The Tailor’ Framed Needlepoint Giovanni Battista Moroni not Tapestry’, *Ebay* <<https://www.ebay.com/itm/The-Tailor-framed-needlepoint-Giovanni-Battista-Moroni-not-tapestry/112968788231?hash=item1a4d76e907:g:3UwAAOSw7XBY8Sug>> [accessed 31 January 2019]. Reproduced by kind permission of the seller.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. and intr. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See Book III, Chapter 10, ‘The Dandiacal Body’.

‘philosophy of clothes’: ‘the Tailor is not only a Man, but something of a Creator or Divinity’, we learn. ‘What too are all poets, and moral Teachers, but a species of Metaphorical Tailors?’ (p. 219). Carlyle’s elevation of the profession grants it a transcendental power which takes tailoring beyond mere clothes-making, in the very opposite direction of the domestication which we have just examined. When, in 1850 Charles Kingsley made his budding poet Alton Locke a tailor, with clear references to Carlyle, his mental and artistic education, from tailor to poet to appreciator of the old masters, chronicles the making of the mid- and late nineteenth-century aesthete.<sup>29</sup> One can only regret that the novel appeared some fifteen years too early; otherwise a scene with Alton Locke facing Moroni’s *Tailor* in the National Gallery would have been full of dramatic potential. By 1888, when the first edition of E. T. Cook’s *Popular Handbook to the National Gallery* was published, the critic’s associative technique took him to Alton Locke in his discussion of the *Tagliapanni*. Quoting from a seventeenth-century poem on Moroni’s piece, which praised its eloquence as a speaking picture, Cook made his own reading of the painting:

A ‘speaking portrait.’ ‘The tailor’s picture is so well done,’ says an old Italian critic, ‘that it speaks better than an advocate could.’ A portrait that enables one, moreover, to realise what was once meant by a ‘worshipful company of merchant tailors.’ Tagliapanni — for such is his name — is no Alton Locke — no discontented ‘tailor and poet’; neither is he like some fashionable West-End tailor, with ambitions of rising above his work. He is well-to-do — notice his handsome ring; but he has the shears in his hands. He does the work himself, and he likes the work. He is something of an artist, it would seem, in clothes: his jacket and handsome breeches were a piece of his work, one may suppose; and the artist has caught and immortalised him, as he is standing back for a minute to calculate the effect of his next cut.<sup>30</sup>

The poet Marco Boschini had seen the painting in a private collection in the Casa Grimani at S. Maria Formosa in Venice in 1660 and described it as

Quel d’un Sartor, sì belo e sì ben fatto  
Che’l parla più de qual se sia Avvocato:  
L’ha in man la forfe, e vù el vedè a tagliar.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1893). The standard critical work on the dandy and aestheticism is James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery*, comp. by E. T. Cook, 8th edn, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1922), 1: *Foreign Schools*, 168.

The Tailor, so beautiful, so well executed  
 A likeness more eloquent than the words of any lawyer  
 The shears are in his hands: we watch where he will cut.  
 (Penny, 1, 236, 241, n. 5)

It is this eloquent likeness which pervades so many of the responses generated by the painting. The lifelike sitter transcends conventional silent painting and makes spectators imagine they can overhear their conversations or that the tailor can address them. For Henry James, in his 1888 short story ‘The Liar’, Moroni’s *Tailor* features as one of the ultimate masterpieces in psychological portraiture, as a painting which draws out the character of the sitter in a way in which the modern portrait painter, appropriately named Lyons, would like to do with his charismatic sitter, the pathological liar Colonel Capadose.<sup>31</sup> Lyons is himself infatuated with Capadose in a way which mirrors his infatuation with Moroni’s painting, and he has high hopes of producing a modern portrait equal to Moroni’s when it comes to psychological depth. Colonel Capadose may be a liar, but Lyons is himself full of self-delusion in his ambition to match the old master:

There were half a dozen portraits in Europe that Lyon rated as supreme; he regarded them as immortal, for they were as perfectly preserved as they were consummately painted. It was to this small exemplary group that he aspired to annex the canvas on which he was now engaged. One of the productions that helped to compose it was the magnificent Moroni of the National Gallery — the young tailor, in the white jacket, at his board with his shears. The Colonel was not a tailor, nor was Moroni’s model, unlike many tailors, a liar; but as regards the masterly clearness with which the individual should be rendered his work would be on the same line as that. He had to a degree in which he had rarely had it before the satisfaction of feeling life grow and grow under his brush.<sup>32</sup>

Lyons does succeed in creating a portrait which is so provocative that the sitter and his wife slash it during a clandestine visit to the artist’s studio; he produces a likeness which speaks so loudly that it has to be silenced. The portrait painter’s infatuated gaze on both his sitter and Moroni’s painting has vague undertones of male desire, and by the late 1880s I suspect that the painting was becoming a popular one within circles of male aesthetes, where the handsome young male was a cult object.

Moroni’s speaking portrait could well have been given more than a cameo performance in English literature. In the early 1890s Walter Pater

<sup>31</sup> See the brief discussion of this painting in Patricia Rubin, ‘“The Liar”: Fictions of the Person’, *Art History*, 34 (2011), 332–51.

<sup>32</sup> Henry James, ‘The Liar’, in *Collected Stories*, ed. by John Bayley, 2 vols (New York: Everyman, 1999), 1: 1866–91, 944.



contemplated writing an entire imaginary portrait on *The Tailor* but died before completing his project.<sup>33</sup> Only a very short manuscript fragment remains in one of Pater's little notes to himself on the intended form and plot of his text. It would appear that he planned an early death for the tailor, from a weak heart during a great fete, but Pater projected male desire for the young man onto a circle of admiring ladies, in the midst of whom he was meant to expire, immortalized as the eternally youthful male victim:

Might it be told by the father — cf. Amber-witch.<sup>34</sup>

Il Sartore.

After all, his p[ride?][ersonality?] asserted itself, — his nat[ure] w[ould] come out — a notion that he is en deuil — [therefore] the g[rea]t ladies fin[ally] come near him — he feels all that — vague affection concurs with heart-disease — dies in a g[rea]t fête, wh[ich] he has organised — It had been a charmed 10 y[ea]rs at Bergamo — & how much had he had to do with it?<sup>35</sup>

Pater's little note is a tease, an alluring fragment of what might have been, and, given that Pater was writing at the height of his powers, it would undoubtedly have been a masterly imaginary portrait, had he lived to write it. Women rarely figure in Pater's fiction, and it is intriguing to see them so centrally placed in the plot outline for his piece. *The Tailor* as a ladies' man was well established by 1890. In Henry de Vere Stacpoole's potboiler *The Lady Killer* (1902), the young protagonist, an impecunious painter who copies old master paintings and has a devastating effect on women, is called Moroni and travels to the National Gallery to copy the old masters.<sup>36</sup> As the anonymous notice in *Academy and Literature* announced:

'He was a very young man, and his clothes seemed very old.'  
That was Julien Moroni, and he was an artist. The book is all

<sup>33</sup> See Arthur Symonds, *A Study of Walter Pater* (London: Sawyer, 1932): 'He had another subject in Moroni's *Portrait of a Tailor* in the National Gallery, whom he was going to make a Burgomaster' (p. 105).

<sup>34</sup> Wilhelm Meinhold's German novel *Maria Schweidler, die Bernsteinhexe* was published in 1844. A literary hoax, it pretended to be a seventeenth-century chronicle. In 1844 it was published as *The Amber Witch* in two English translations: one by E. A. Friedlander and another by Lady Duff Gordon. According to Billie Andrew Inman, Pater owned a copy of the 1861 edition of Duff Gordon's translation which is now in the collection of Brasenose College, Oxford. See Inman, *Walter Pater's Reading: A Bibliography of his Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858–1873* (New York: Garland, 1981), p. 489. For a modern edition, see Wilhelm Meinhold, *The Amber Witch*, trans. by Lady Duff Gordon, intro. and ed. by Barbara Burns, MHRA European Translations, 4 (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Walter Pater, 'Il Sartore', Harvard University, Houghton bMS Eng. 1150 (22), fol. 12<sup>r</sup>. <[https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:45474392\\$421i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:45474392$421i)> [accessed 31 January 2019]. The transcription was generously provided by Lesley Higgins.

<sup>36</sup> Henry de Vere Stacpoole, *The Lady Killer* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1902).

about artists and dealers and one Gavarni, who communicated to Moroni a wonderful secret, and made him beautiful and irresistible. There are some thrills in the story, and the air of mystery is well sustained.<sup>37</sup>

I shall reveal no more of the plot, except mention that Moroni has light facial surgery which alters his gaze so that he becomes irresistible to any woman who looks at him. The technique of the facial surgery was developed by none other than Benvenuto Cellini, a contemporary of our *Tailor* in the National Gallery. Benvenuto, apparently, 'could tell at a glance one of these woman fascinators, and always, and always, and always this tribal expression was situated about the eye' (Stacpoole, p. 102). The dying Gavarni, who is the intermediary between Cellini and the young Moroni, makes the Renaissance artist spring to life by quoting from a manuscript found in the Vatican Library:

'Now,' said Benvenuto as calmly as if he were discussing the growing of turnips, 'since Nature has created an expression for the allurements of the feminine mind, why cannot Art do likewise? With one touch of a brush we can alter the whole expression of a painted face; well, if so, why not the expression of a human face? And, in fact,' said he, a few lines further on, 'I have done so.' Then he described how he had, with the aid of two thin lines, near the outer angle of each eye drawn with a brush dipped in walnut juice, bestowed upon a dull young man of his acquaintance this expression of fascination, converting the young man into a love adept, and how, as a result, the young man some few weeks later, had been stabbed to death by a jealous husband. (pp. 103–04)

In Stacpoole's narrative Moroni is transformed into a woman fascinator. By 1902 there would have been enough paintings by Giovanni Battista Moroni on display in the National Gallery to give any visitor a sense of the particularly captivating gaze which characterizes most of his portraits. The slippage in *The Lady Killer* between art and life, between Renaissance Italy and *fin-de-siècle* London is intriguing. The walls between the old masters and their modern admirers are constantly collapsing, and a modern Moroni walks the streets of the metropolis and sets the hearts of women aflame by the dozen.

In another *fin-de-siècle* potboiler, 'The Accursed Cordonnier', the figure of the Wandering Jew, travelling the world through centuries, wears a personalized garment made by the tailor in Moroni's painting. At the end of the tale, the aged Jew is magically transformed into *The Tailor's* lookalike.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> 'Notes on Novels', *Academy and Literature*, 30 August 1902, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard Capes, 'The Accursed Cordonnier', *Dome*, July 1900, pp. 101–30.

The ubiquity and continued topicality of the old masters transpire from 'The Accursed Cordonnier'. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair, the association of Moroni's *Tailor* and the Jews is given a new twist. Tailoring was a well-established Jewish profession, and our handsome Bergamesque sitter might well have been of Jewish origin. Time travel with a Wandering Jewish protagonist, who has his measurements taken in the mid-sixteenth century for a garment, 'a marvel of sartorial tact and ingenuity', which figures at the turn of the twentieth century, makes 440 years vanish into thin air:

'It is indeed an excellent piece of work,' said Amos, with considerable appreciation; for he held no contempt for the art which sometimes alone seemed to justify his right of existence.

'Your praise is deserved,' said the stranger, smiling: 'seeing that it was contrived for me by one whose portrait, by Giambattista Moroni, now hangs in your National Gallery.'

'I have heard of it, I think. Is the fellow still in business?'

'The tailor or the artist? The first died bankrupt in prison, — about the year 1560, it must have been. It was fortunate for me, inasmuch as I acquired the garment for nothing, the man disappearing before I had settled his claim.' (p. 119)

The stranger's transformation into a young man with a magnetic influence on the female protagonist would be recognized by regular visitors to the National Gallery. The cordonnier, the shoemaker, is a resurrected version of the fellow artisan who made his garments, and rather than a worn, wasted, restless type of the Wandering Jew, he appears in new, pristine condition, a vivid individual just painted in words:

He was unmistakably a Jew, of the finest primitive type — such as might have existed in pre-neurotic days. His complexion was of a smooth golden russet; his nose and lips were cut rather in the lines of sensuous cynicism; the look in his polished brown eyes was of defiant self-confidence, capable of the extremes of devotion or of obstinacy. Short curling black hair covered his scalp, and his moustache and small crisp beard were of the same hue. (p. 128)

The allusion to Moroni's *Tailor* takes us to the handsome, ageless face, celebrated by Elizabeth Fremantle and Sarah Godsill. The extent to which Moroni's sitter can be separated from his profession is a complex issue, the tension between our awareness of the man underneath the clothes and his ability to make others look equally spectacular, thanks to his masterly use of his shears. The painting's cameo appearance in George Egerton's short story 'A Psychological Moment' (1894) may not at first signify much. The female protagonist, the mistress of a wealthy man, contemplates first the statue of the Egyptian King Rhameses in the British Museum and

subsequently Moroni's *Tailor*, 'her ideal portrait — indeed he was the only tailor she ever pined to know.'<sup>39</sup> The brief passage involves a rebellion against a male authority on art:

She was much astonished once, when some one told her that she was plagiarizing Mr. Ruskin, when she said that Moroni's tailor was her ideal portrait — indeed he was the only tailor she ever pined to know. But she astonished her informant equally when she dared to say that she disagreed with that great authority on many points; and that, besides, her own liking or non-liking was the only criticism worth a do it to her. (p. 77)

To the best of my abilities, I have not been able to find any references in Ruskin to Moroni. In October 1888, however, Harry Furniss had lectured on portraiture at the Birkbeck Institute in London, a much-quoted lecture, which had a passage on 'The Ideal Portrait', in which *The Tailor* was held up as the lecturer's pet specimen.<sup>40</sup> Egerton may well have intended a rebellion against Ruskin as an authoritative father figure; the assertion of the female spectator's subjectivity and right to maintain it transpires clearly from the passage. The female protagonist's brief allusion to the painting serves as the overture to an account of her life as a kept woman in Paris, dressed in the latest fashion to please her male lover. When seen through his eyes, the difference between dress and thought becomes all too obvious:

He was as astonished and proud of the transformation clothes effected in her outwardly, as disappointed at their effect on her inner self. She chose the right things in obedience to her innate sense of beauty and fitness, and wore them with the same ease as her old serge frock. (Egerton, p. 81)

The freedom of mind retained by the female protagonist becomes the beginning of a new life of emancipation, as she leaves her fashion-conscious lover behind. *The Tailor*, however, retains his ideal status, as a man she would like to know, but who, in the nature of things, she will have to relate to in the art gallery or in a modern copy. A safe choice, he nevertheless becomes the catalyst for the first of her rebellions against male authorities, and the psychological moment, in recollection of a psychological portrait, testifies persuasively to the powerful presence of the old masters for the female gaze.

<sup>39</sup> George Egerton, 'A Psychological Moment at Three Periods', in *Keynotes and Discords*, ed. by Sally Ledger (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 67–94 (p. 77).

<sup>40</sup> 'Portraits and Portrait-Painting', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 October 1888, p. 5.